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ABSTRACT

The images of life conveyed by television appear to have substantial impact on the expectations and standards that guide teenagers' choices and that shape their sense of satisfaction with their own life circumstances. This study compared the perceptions of 5th through 11th grade adolescents (N=133) of their own life experiences with those of their favorite television characters and the adolescent's closest friends. The congruence between the subjects' own personal experience of family restrictiveness, criticism, punitiveness, and sex roles and the experiences of both television characters and the adolescents' peers was assessed. The relationship between any incongruence and reported dissatisfaction was investigated in order to estimate the relative importance of television and peer role models. The influence of television and peers on body image and smoking was investigated. The relative importance of exposure to televised and real-life role models was assessed by considering the individual that the adolescent reported admiring most. Findings revealed that, although dissatisfaction was associated with wishing one's own life more closely resembled television, the overall television-self experience discrepancy scores were not related to family dissatisfaction. This suggests that adolescents may not use the specific family experiences they observe on television in establishing the standards against which they evaluate their own circumstances. (Author/NB)

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PREDICTORS OF ADOLESCENT SELF APPRAISAL: PERCEPTIONS OF TELEVISION CHARACTERS VS. PEERS

The images of life conveyed by television appear to have substantial impact on the expectations and standards that guide teenagers' choices and that shape their sense of satisfaction with their own life circumstances.

This study compared 133 5th through 11th grade adolescents' perceptions of their own life experiences with those of their favorite television characters and the adolescents closest friends. The congruence between the subjects' own personal experience of family restrictiveness, criticism, punitiveness, and sex roles and the experiences of both T.V. characters and their peers was assessed. The relationship between any incongruence and reported dissatisfaction was investigated in order to estimate the relative importance of television and peer role models.

The influence of T.V. and peers on body image and smoking was investigated. The relative importance of exposure to televised and real-life role models was assessed by considering the individual that the adolescent reported they most admire.

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Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of media on adolescents' attitudes and behavior (Gordon, 1986; Kendl & McDermott et al, 1989; Livingstone, 1990; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Stack 1990). In particular, the images of life conveyed by television appear to have a substantial impact on the expectations and standards that guide teenagers' behavioral choices and that shape their sense of satisfaction with their own life circumstances. The average adolescent is exposed to 26.7 hours of television per week (Selnow, 1986). This immersion comprises much of the adolescent's experience of the outside culture, and might reasonably be expected to shape the adolescent's sense of normative behavior.

The experiences of fictional characters on television may frequently provide a yardstick against which adolescents compare themselves and their families. If they evaluate their actual life situations by contrasting them with the images they've absorbed from television, then they may feel disappointed or deprived when real experience falls short of the expectations shaped by fictional families and heroes.

On the other hand, it is possible that by adolescence, television viewers are sufficiently cognitively sophisticated to distinguish between the fantasies portrayed on television and the day-to-day realities they expect to encounter. They may perceive television characters and families as highly artificial renditions of social reality, and accord them with little weight in judging their own real experiences. It is possible that adolescent standards and expectations are far more shaped by their interactions with peers than by television. Information about social reality gleaned through peer relationships and observing the families of friends might be more influential because it is viewed as more relevant and realistic. Furthermore, direct, active real-life encounters with peers may be more salient and memorable than passive exposure to the televised world.

The present study will compare adolescent's perceptions of their own life experiences with those of their favorite television characters and their closest friends. The congruence between the subject's own personal experience of family restrictiveness, criticism, punitiveness, and sex roles and the experiences of both the T.V. characters and their peers will be assessed. The relationship between any incongruence and reported dissatisfaction will be investigated, in order to estimate the relative importance of television and peer role models.

The influence of T.V. and peers on body image and smoking behavior will also be investigated. Lastly, the relative importance to exposure to televised real-life role models will also be assessed by considering the individual that the adolescent reports they most admire.

METHODS

The data examined here is based on the responses of 133 adolescents (grades 5 through 11). In the high school (grades 8 through 11) the students completed a questionnaire consisting of 49 questions comparing the adolescents perceptions of their own life experiences, with those of their closest friends and with their favorite television characters. The questionnaire assessed perceived parental restraint and criticism, adolescents smoking and body image, and who they most admire. The students completed the questionnaire in homeroom during a ten minute period. Two of the high school homerooms were monitored by an undergraduate research student. The majority of the questionnaires were collected by the researcher immediately following the completion of the questionnaires by the students. The remainder, twenty-three questionnaires, was picked up the following day because there had not been enough time in one of the homerooms for their completion.

In the middle school (grades 5 through 7) the questionnaires were simply given to the homeroom teachers who volunteered their class to participate in the study. The teachers administered the questionnaires when they had time. One of the middle school homerooms was monitored by an undergraduate research student. All of the questionnaires were collected two days after they were given to the teachers.

A permission slip that was to be given to the parents of the adolescents and a cover letter explaining who we are and what the study is about was included with the questionnaires. Both schools decided that the permission slip was not necessary, but they did include the cover letter so that the students would understand the study and why we needed their participation.

RESULTS

A total of 72 male and 60 female students, with a mean age of 13.32 years, completed the questionnaires. The respondents included 21 students in the 5th grade, 19 in the 6th grade, 28 in the 7th grade, 23 in the 8th grade, 9 in the 9th grade, 13 in the 10th grade, and 20 in the 11th grade.

A summary measure of dissatisfaction with parents was calculated for each subject by adding the seven items assessing displeasure with parental restraint and criticism. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in dissatisfaction with parental restraint and criticism for subjects who wished their lives more closely resembled those on television ($x=13.03$, $s.d.=4.48$, $n=37$), than those who did not report such a wish ($x=11.12$, $s.d.=3.62$, $n=68$; $F=5.63$, $d.f.=1$, $p<.02$).

The discrepancy between perceived television character experience of parental restraint and criticism, and one's own experience, was measured by subtracting each of the relevant self rating scores from its television character rating counterpart item. Overall television self discrepancy was assessed by totaling the separate item differences. There was no significant correlation between overall perceived television-self experience discrepancy score and parental dissatisfaction score ($r= -.05$, n.s.).

Discrepancy between perceived peer experience of parental restraint and criticism, and one's own experiences, was measured by subtracting each of the relevant self rating item scores from its peer rating counterpart item. Overall peer self discrepancy was assessed by totaling the separate item differences. No significant correlation was found between overall perceived peer-self experience discrepancy score and parental dissatisfaction score ($r= -.13$, n.s.).

DISCUSSION

These results provided some support for the hypothesis that those adolescents who idealize life on television would be more likely to report dissatisfaction of their own lives. However, it is possible that the adolescents' dissatisfaction with their own lives preceded their wishful thinking about television. This correlational design did not permit a causal determination. Future longitudinal research might clarify the direction of effects observed here.

Although dissatisfaction was associated with wishing one's life more closely resembled television, the overall television-self experience discrepancy scores weren't related to family dissatisfaction. This suggests that adolescents may not use the specific family experiences they observe on television in establishing the standards against which they evaluate their own circumstances. Although in a global way they may idealize television life, they apparently do not judge their parents' restraint and criticism behaviors on the basis of comparisons with television parents.

In a similar vein, the absence of a significant relationship between overall peer-self experience discrepancy scores and parental dissatisfaction scores suggests that specific behavioral comparisons with peers' families are also not the basis for dissatisfaction with ones' own family.

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